

# Self-analysis of Language Acquisition Success Factors

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In this paper, I summarize and analyze the success factors from a psychological perspective through a self-examination of own successful mastery of Hokkien and Cantonese.

*Keywords:* language acquisition, Hokkien, Cantonese, psychology

## **The Relationship Between Language Acquisition and Psychology**

Language acquisition involves both student learning and teacher teaching. I am a graduate student majoring in Chinese International Education, and my main study is teaching Chinese to foreigners. This kind of teaching is essentially second language teaching. We need to study not only the ways and methods to transfer language knowledge and skills to learners, but also the process and laws of learning language knowledge and mastering language skills, which requires the support of psychological knowledge and theories. First, psychology, especially cognitive psychology, is a science that studies the psychological laws and psychological mechanisms by which people acquire knowledge, master skills, and develop intelligence. Second language teaching, based on the general principles of psychology, can be more scientific and productive in training language learners to acquire language knowledge and language skills. Second, to study the learning process of language learners, it is necessary to analyze the different processes of first language acquisition and second language acquisition, and to study the different characteristics of children's acquisition of their mother tongue and adults' learning and acquisition of a second language, and such a study cannot be done without the support of psychology. Third, second language teaching requires not only the study of learners' learning processes, but also the study of learners' own characteristics, such as motivation, learning strategies, learning styles, and cognitive and attitudinal-emotional factors of language learning, all of which require the knowledge, theories, and methods of psychology. Fourth, psychology, like linguistics and education, is also an important basis for the emergence of foreign language teaching methods. For example, the listening method is based on the stimulus-response theory of behaviorist psychology, while the cognitive method is based on psychological theories, mainly the cognitive learning theory.

## **Research Ideas**

The previous section mentioned that the study of individual learner factors is a very important part of second language teaching research. It is also this piece that this paper wants to explore. At this level, the problem of teaching can be transformed into a problem of learning, and the teacher as a language learner can be used to support teaching activities through his or her own experiences.

The study of individual learner factors can also be understood as a psychological approach to the consideration of learners, which involves a number of factors: Age, learning ability and motivation are the most well-known. These factors tend to interact with each other, and it is difficult to isolate any one factor and analyze its absolute effect. In other words, the influence of these factors on the success of language learning is multilayered and multifaceted, and there is no absolute cause-and-effect relationship. In the eighth edition of Slavin's *Educational Psychology*, a section called "Personal Reflection" is included, which I think is a natural consequence of such objective factors.

In my classification of learning systems, human learning can be broadly divided into two categories: first, purely metaphysical learning, i.e., mathematics, logic, etc.; second, purely subjective aesthetic learning, i.e., literature, etc. Here I assume that there are and only are two intrinsic properties of any learning: metaphysical and subjective. For example, natural disciplines such as physics and chemistry are metaphysically inclined, but still subjective. The further away from people, the stronger the metaphysics; the closer to people, the stronger the subjectivity. And what kind of learning is language learning? Naturally, it is a study of both. Human language has always been a product of human life and development, and the emphasis on its humanistic nature will never go out of fashion. Therefore, in the field of language acquisition, personal reflections of an empirical nature are sometimes more useful than empty theoretical statements.

Having successfully acquired Cantonese and Hokkien, two ethnic Chinese languages that differ significantly from Mandarin, within two years, I am confident and qualified to speak on the issue of language acquisition. I will then discuss my own experiences in the context of Muriel Saville-Troike's (2005) framework for classifying individual learner factors, which will be somewhat similar to what Slavin calls "personal reflection".

## **Reflection**

### **Age**

The discourse involving this dimension is usually no more than the issue of contrasting first and second language learners and the critical period hypothesis. The critical period hypothesis is mainly addressed to first language learners and we can ignore it. We will mainly talk about the contrast between the two types of learners. This contrast was very strong when I was learning Cantonese and Hokkien. Because of the lack of classroom education in both languages (even in Hong Kong, where the so-called modern written Chinese is still taught in Mandarin), native speakers in adulthood actually have no different rational perception of their mother tongue than they did when they were first introduced to it in their early childhood. This lack of rational cognition is reflected in the fact that native speakers are limited to speaking but lack the ability to write in their native language. This lack of writing ability means that they are vulnerable to the influence of a strong language and lose their native language skills, which is often referred to as "pidginization". In the case of the Chinese language, "pidginization" usually means "universalization". Except for Mandarin, which is the official language of China and has a standardized system, most other Chinese languages do not have a standard written language system, and Chinese usually uses Chinese characters as a means of recording, which undoubtedly makes it more difficult to write, because we have to learn a set of characters that have nothing to do with pronunciation before we can have the right to write our mother tongue. I learned Cantonese when I was 22 and Hokkien when I was 23, both outside the so-called critical period, typical of adult learners. Compared to the native speakers I mentioned earlier, I have the advantage of a complete logical system of thinking. This is

specifically demonstrated in my mastery of written language, as I am fluent in Cantonese pinyin (Jyut6jyu5ping1jam1) and Taiwanese Hokkien Romanization (Tâi-uân Bân-lâm-gí Lô-má-jī). I was able to use the pinyin system to learn Cantonese and Hokkien Chinese characters, and I was also able to record the language directly from sounds into written words, possessing the ability to use tools and documents. This is something that native speakers generally lack.

### **Gender**

Women are traditionally considered to have better language learning abilities than men in the West. This common belief is also very much in line with our general perception. Taking the example of learning English in primary and secondary schools, it is also true that more girls than boys do well, and that girls in non-Mandarin areas are generally better at Mandarin than boys. But in the Chinese context, we can also observe an interesting phenomenon, namely that girls are usually poor native speakers. There are far more women than men who tend to speak Mandarin and less of their home language, and in my personal experience, the various dialect group chats and societies I've been in contact with have been pathetically sparse in women. I think this has to do with the traditional patriarchal social environment, where men dominate one side of the land and one clan, and they naturally reject foreign things. Among the people I asked, those who were engaged in or interested in preserving their dialects invariably felt that Mandarin was encroaching on their "territory". Women, on the other hand, do not have this baggage and aspire to high status, high fashion, and all things fashionable. This can also be interpreted as a kind of self-rebellion in a patriarchal society: If I am oppressed everywhere, why can't I find a better place to be oppressed? From my observation, in my parents' generation, it was also a common phenomenon for women to "撇腔 (pieqiang)". The so-called "pieqiang" is to deliberately speak some other language, for example, when expressing politeness will say "thank you" in Mandarin. This mentality is similar to the way some girls like to speak in English, because in their minds both Mandarin and English represent high status and fashion trends. At this level, the statement "women are better language learners than men" is less accurate and should be changed to "women have an advantage in learning a superior language". Perhaps the "advantage" would not be so obvious if girls were to learn the vernacular of a poor countryside.

### **Learning Ability**

For language learning ability, Carrol (1965) suggested the following four points.

1. Phonemic coding ability,
2. Inductive language learning ability,
3. Grammatical sensitivity,
4. Associative memory capacity.

As I mentioned in the previous section, I mastered the pinyin system of Cantonese and Hokkien, and used it to record language, which is actually a manifestation of phonemic coding ability, which can link phonology and semantics. I have consciously prepared several categorized vocabulary manuals in the course of my studies, with books dedicated to the recording of real and imaginary words, which is a reflection of an inductive approach to language learning. While it is often assumed that the Chinese family of languages is grammatically similar, I was sensitive enough to record and categorize many grammatical phenomena that exist in the spoken language. For example:

1. Record of Hokkien grammar:

Verb. + 拢无 Lóng bô (什么都没……到) Nothing to...

Verb. + 啥有 Siá<sup>a</sup> ū (什么都有得……) There is something to...

Verb. + 无啥有 Bô siá<sup>a</sup> ū (不怎么...得到了) Not much to... anymore

袂比得 bōe pí tit (比不上) not as good as

## 2. Record of Cantonese grammar:

住 zyu6

我（暂时）唔同你讲住嘅啦。

暂时不和你说了。

Not to talk-zyu6 (住) to you first.

I'm almost done with this book.

咁滞 gam2zai3

佢（差唔多/快要/几乎）都睇晒本书咁滞（嘅啰喎）。

他差不多要看完这本书（）了。

I'm almost done with this book.

得滞: 快得滞（快过头） Very fast

As for associative memory, I make full use of the uniformity of Chinese characters. Using the unified character form of kanji solves many pronunciation memorization problems. Chinese characters are a phonetic script that can form words:

cap abili ty

IPA ce<sup>1</sup>p ʔbil<sup>1</sup> ti

抓 能 性

Sharing a set of morphemes does not necessarily mean that the words are consistent. Different Chinese languages in the same semantic expressions can often employ different Chinese characters, a phenomenon that becomes more pronounced the more colloquial and underlying it is. For example: 怎么样 (zen3 me yang4) in Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese would use “dim2 joeng6” (点样) instead of not “zam2 mo1 joeng6”; Hokkien (Taiwanese) would use “an1 choann2”(安怎) instead of “choann2 mo1 iunn6”; Wu (in Gaochun) would use ghayanka(何样介); Hakka (four counties in Taiwan) would use ngiong52ban35 hin11 (仰般形). In this example, Hakka does not use “形” but “样”. Wu uses “何” instead of “怎么”, reflecting the freedom of Chinese characters as morphemes to form words. Let us imagine: If we understand Chinese characters in terms of words, it is inevitable that we will not be able to understand the phenomenon of using different characters for the same word at the word level characters to form words.

The word “Aquarium” is used in English, where “aqua” stands for water and comes from the Latin word. For example, in Spanish, water is “aqua”. Although, the word “aqua” cannot be used alone, not standing for water in English. This shared morpheme has a common fixed writing style in the East Asian world, namely 汉字 (Chinese characters).

For example, the following 汉字 meaning “peace safe”. It has the same writing form but different pronunciation:

安 U+5B89

[Tang Dynasty] qan

[Mandarin] ān

[Cantonese] on1 (ngon1)

[Shanghainese] oe1

[Hokkien] an1, uann1

[Korean] 안

[Vietnamese] an, yên

[Japanese] あん

There is a distant or close relationship between languages. We can understand this relationship through the results of previous research in order to grasp the commonalities and differences between languages, just as I use shared 汉字 morphemes to learn other languages within the Sinitic languages besides Mandarin.

### Cognitive Style and Personality

Cognitive style and personality are usually counted as two factors, and I personally feel that there is a lot of intersection between the two, so they are discussed together in this paper. Cognitive style refers to the way information is perceived, interpreted, organized, and recalled. This part is probably better known as “field independence” and “field dependence”, although evidence such as Hansen and Stansfield’s (1981) experimental results demonstrates that such parameters have little effect on language acquisition. In this area, I think it is worthwhile to analyze and discuss the “full-analysis” pair of parameters. We can broadly classify language learners into two categories. The former is keen on collecting the actual corpus used by people and forming paradigms through imitation, while the latter likes to extract rules from concise and standardized sentences in textbooks to guide themselves in forming new sentences. I should say that I have used both approaches, the first being the same as what Glossika offers: a lot of sentence practice (listening, reading, writing) instead of grammar explanations. The second way is to follow the teacher’s lessons and memorize word formation and grammar points. My own experience has been to maintain a sense of a language (i.e., input) in the first way, and then to examine the corpus with the rules extracted in the second way. In this case, I can often find a mismatch between the corpus and the rules, where the everyday corpus often does not follow the grammatical rules. In this case, we need to make it clear that there is an element of artificiality in the grammatical rules and not exactly in the statement of linguistic facts in their natural state. So my suggestion is that it is more flexible to choose a certain style to perceive the language according to the actual needs.

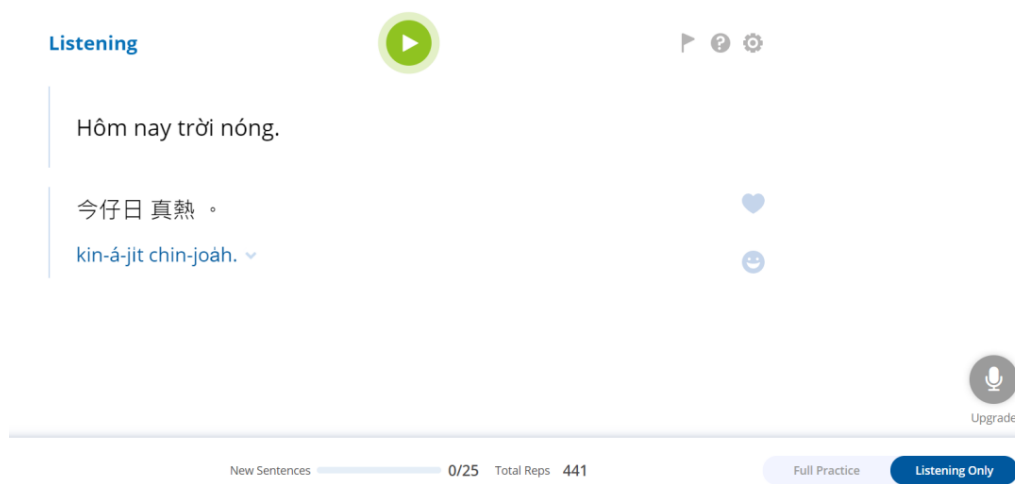


Figure 1. Glossika's language practice page.

Personality and cognitive style are closely related, and as I mentioned above, it is not easy to choose a cognitive style based on actual needs. If I am dealing with a less educated group of people, then I must not follow the rules of the book to socialize, which will inevitably require us to have a more “field-dependent” cognitive style. This is reflected in our personality, which is more lively and sociable. However, personality is difficult to change and cannot be chosen by ourselves. Therefore, personality is often a limiting point when considering cognitive strategies.

### **Attitude and Motivation**

My attitude towards learning Cantonese and Hokkien reflects a very strong cultural identity, and a heartfelt love for the culture of Guangfu and Mintai. On reflection, the reason why I chose to learn these two languages among so many other Chinese languages and persisted until now is that Cantonese has the support of Hong Kong pop culture while Hokkien has Taiwan. In the process of learning, I was often active in various chat rooms as a Hong Konger or Taiwanese, often pretending to be a real person, I was often recognized as a fellow countryman, and I enjoyed this sense of “pretending to be a real person”. My motivation for learning is what Gardner and Lambert call “integrative motivation”, and they specifically point out that motivation for this tendency tends to be an “additive language” mode of language acquisition, and indeed my personal experience fits this description. I did not regress in Mandarin and Wu because I learned Cantonese and Hokkien, but on the contrary, I improved Mandarin and Wu. As for the so-called “instrumental motivation”, it is not significant in my case because I do not use Cantonese and Hokkien in my daily life or as a learner. This is completely different from the motivation of those who go to Hong Kong to study and work in Cantonese. However, in my gradual learning, I discovered that there is in fact an “instrumental motivation”: For example, for the study of Chinese phonology, Cantonese and Hokkien are non-Mandarin languages that retain a lot of traces of ancient Chinese sounds, and I can use the acquired language to give many examples. I call this the production of “secondary motivation”. It is difficult to generate secondary motivation if the first motivation is instrumental. This seems to reveal that integrated motivation to learn a language is more efficient than instrumental learning.

### **Summary**

Rod Ellis (1985/2015) has summarized nine attributes of “good language learners”, four of which I believe are key to my success.

1. Respond to the group dynamics of the learning environment without negative anxiety or overwhelm,
2. Seek out all opportunities to use the target language,
3. Maximize the opportunities I get to practice listening and responding to myself and to others with a focus on meaning rather than form,
4. Be willing to take risks and experiment, even if doing so makes you look ridiculous.

I mentioned in the previous section that “integrative motivation is better than instrumental motivation”, so this is where I can further explain the difficulties of implementing it. Can integrative motivation be sustained to the point of “second motivation”? It is usually difficult because most people in an ethnic group are actually xenophobic. How can we talk about integration with a “foreign accent”? It is likely that the second motivation will be lost before it is generated. In order to maintain this motivation, it is necessary to do the first of the four points listed above. If you can avoid the tension and anxiety caused by the “exclusion” of the target culture, you will naturally be able to achieve the remaining two, three, and four points.

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